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Tracing Dialogue in the Classroom: Exchanges of Meaning/Changes of Meaning

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> THIS ACCORDING TO HAWKEYE:
> "Wait, wait," says Coyote. "When's my turn?"
> "Coyotes don't get a turn," I says.
> "In a democracy, everyone gets a turn," says Coyote.
> "Nonsense," I says. "In a democracy, only people who can
> afford it get a turn."
> "How about half a turn?" says Coyote.
> "Sit down," I says. "We got to tell this story again."
> "How about a quarter turn?" says Coyote.
> (Thomas King)[1]

In the classroom: I use the word "dialogue" in this context strategically, to displace any (op) positions which have already been spoken. The difficulty in communicating what I mean by the word 'dialogue' is one that faces all those who use language. Dialogue, as David Murray (1991) suggests, implies the assumption of communicating through difference and Otherness, and between worlds of experience (p.147). If those worlds of experience were identical, the need for dialogue would not exist. Consequently, meaning remains a production of oppositions, and any meaning expressed through classroom dialogue remains a negotiation. As James Clifford (1988) points out, "Every use of I presupposes a you, and every instance of discourse is immediately linked to a specific, shared situation: no discursive meaning, then, without interlocution and context" (p.41). What then, forms the interlocution or the context which structures the student's dialogue with his/her professor in textual, written form?

Murray argues further that those author(ities) who advocate the use of dialogue as the means of expressing the ethnographic encounter tend to fall into two categories: there are those who decide that dialogue forms its own end, and those who regard dialogue—both their own and that of others—as the means to a different end (1991, p.147). The word 'dialogue' itself clearly carries with it notions of exchange, a verbal intercourse of thought. It also suggests balance and hints at a discursive to and fro among speakers. Consequently, the 'dialogistic' suggests a student's taking part in a dialogue, or multiple dialogues, among students and teachers; it also suggests taking turns, constructing a delicate balancing act in a classroom where power relations remain unequal. The word 'dialogue' is, as well, related to the word 'dialect'; it hints at one's manner of speaking and implies the specificity of language carried through to the level of the individual—one's 'idiolect,' if you will.

Defining and displacing: If, as Ferdinand de Saussure, the great patriarch of linguistics has suggested, the linguistic community can only guarantee meaning in the form of semantic consensus, through arbitrary rules and conventions (the guarantor of such meaning is the convention) then there can be no guarantee of meaning in this post-Derridean era. Yet dialogue, both inside and outside the classroom, insists on its own particular linguistic community; it thus moves towards its own peculiar—and particular—resolution of meaning. Still, (binary) oppositions continue to put themselves into play through some (as yet unspoken) third element (or person). How can one balance the accounts of meaning(s) in the classroom within this system—a not-quite deconstructed structure, an institution contained in/of/by itself through four (or more) walls?

Clearly, dialogue manifests itself as a specific problematic within the context of the classroom. How will student and professor negotiate these institutionalized sets of power relations during their precarious balancing act? Once engaged in the acting out—the performance—of dialogue, how can those in the classroom also engage themselves in the act of balancing, or alternatively, displacing, other sets of power relations?

This brings me to the central problem of my own authority as writer: who am I speaking to, and who am I speaking for, during the processing of this written text? With whom am I inter-acting during this conversation? Lee Maracle (1992) tells me, "…the ridiculousness of European academic notions of theoretical presentation lies in the inherent hierarchy retained by academics, politicians, law makers, and law keepers. Power resides with the theorists so long as they use language no one understands. In order to gain the right to theorize, one must attend their institutions for many years, learn this other language, and unlearn our feelings for the human condition. Bizarre" (p. 90). Maracle's words point to my own difficulty in re-creating the notion of dialogue while using the language of theory: how/what I speak can only mirror what I should say.

Langue vs. parole: The critical language of deconstruction remains paradoxically elitist even while it attempts to take apart the notion of hierarchy. While writing that remains impenetrable and incomprehensible to one person may be quite accessible to another reader, the issue of how much formal education is required to begin to understand certain texts is only minimally open to debate: the project of deconstruction writing creates a new elite even while it undermines it/s/elf as part of its own project. How my knowledge gets organized into words—and how I express that knowledge through dialogue—cannot be thought of separately from any theorizing around the knowledge itself.

When I speak to a three year old child and instruct that child to "use your words" rather than resorting to physical violence, I am operating from the top of a certain hierarchy, both linguistically and otherwise. I am encouraging—perhaps even coercing—that child to

use/learn the power of words. But I am also expressing a multiplicity of meanings in that dialogue that move beyond the words themselves. My implicit instructions, "Use language, rather than violence, to express your feelings," suggest that violence does not exist in language itself. In contrast, when I tell a four year old not to call his brother a "fucking idiot," I am both acknowledging and condemning linguistic violence, as well as acknowledging the connection between word and thing. In each instance, I choose my words carefully. What I do not say becomes as important as what I do say: meaning resides in the gaps between my words as articulated thoughts. Asserting, "You need to use your words," simultaneously hides and expresses an agenda, as does stating, "That is not a word I like to hear." In both instances, when my words create a desired response, one can say that the dialogue, or communication, has been 'successful.' Yet, as power relations are restored through conversation, I cannot help but wonder if this tipping of the scales really constitutes the balancing act that is dialogue.

Movement from opposition to agreement, from difference to sameness, suggests itself in these representations of dialogue, which can (and perhaps must) be one-sided. This kind of agreement imposes itself on at least one of the interlocutors in the conversation. By drawing attention to myself as the source of a certain authority, I justify that same authority. Knowledge, as First Nations storytellers and Michel Foucault know all too well, holds a dangerous power. Yet, as in the examples I gave on the preceding page, there is sometimes little space for me to negotiate my authority, even as I attempt to share in a dialogue with my students.

One takes up particular, and multiple, positions at specific points in time when playing the roles of parent, or professor, and consequently, in the process of parenting, or professing. Many of these positions speak from a place of authority and author-ship. The consequent presuppositions that one unknowingly takes with him or herself are those which concern me now. My parental self, like my professorial self, carries with it the baggage—the trace—of its own institutionalized authority. The question becomes: how can one escape the kinds of authority that have been imposed on oneself and which I now threaten to impose upon Other, docile, bodies? As Gayatri Spivak (1988) has pointed out, "History and institutions of power and authority are stronger than the limits of personal good will. If you deny them, they will get in through the back door" (p.98). Yet, how does one recognize the nature of that which is clamouring at the back door?

Contingent gaps: Deconstructions, like definitions and parental negotiations, are—and must be—contingent. These contingencies change from situation to situation and, therefore, need continual re-negotiation. Perhaps by using the idea of dialogue in the classroom as a gesture in the same way that Jacques Derrida (1990) argues for the necessity of gestures like Women's Studies departments at universities, one may escape, strategically and momentarily, the

imposition of certain closed and arbitrary meanings—meanings that inscribe themselves onto the bodies of Other/selves. In fact, Derrida argues that what is necessary to something called Women's Studies is more than one gesture at the same time. He suggests that, while separate and distinct Women's Studies departments remain a necessity, one simultaneously cannot give up the idea of Women's Studies "penetrating all other fields" (p.118). Similarly, I must ask myself, how can I construct this multiplicity of gestures within a singular classroom?

The danger remains that dialogue, when mirrored, retains the potential to operate fascistically. Perhaps, however, it can become multi-faceted by one's insistence on the plurality of dialogic modes and dialogic contexts. Murray (1991) takes up this question of dialogic authority by examining, as he says, "where exactly the dialogisation takes place" (p.151); he observes that textual authority and other sorts of authority are not the same thing. Murray instead focuses on the "social and institutional production and reception" of authority as a way to power in particular contexts (p.151): likewise, my speech, my voice, and my writing carry with them a certain authority only in specific instances of articulation. In other contexts that authority may be displaced or even absent (my authority as a woman in a patriarchal society, for instance). The student's desire to speak and to be heard may also, consequently, be read as the desire to reconstitute his or her/self as a speaking subject. This student is not only capable of participating in an exchange of thought with other students and, ultimately, the professor, as the context of institutional authority, from initiation to graduation, shifts, but s/he has the potential to displace hierarchies of power in the process.

Negotiations: Language mediates. The first Other is, as Jacques Lacan has suggested, is language itself. But perhaps one also gives voice through silence. Within the institution there exists a perception of dialogue as the means to various ends—perhaps most obviously, a degree. Students are required by professor, in the context of the classroom and the institution, to engage in dialogues in particular sorts of ways. When a student manipulates his or her part of an interchange in such a way that it corresponds with whatever is expected of him/her by the professor, their dialogue is 'successful' in the same way that one's dialogue with a three year old is 'successful.' But whether that dialogue really carries with it an exchange of meaning, and not simply changes of meaning that reinforce traditional power relations, remains an open question. In the context of the institution, both professor and student reconstruct themselves as Others. As Robin Ridington (1990) notes, "Through our discourse with one another we negotiate a world in which we can understand our differences … Two speakers, or two cultures, are more than the sum of their parts. Discourse is only a problem when we talk past one another or worse use talk to suppress another person's ability to express him- or herself freely" (pp.189-190). In the classroom, one still does not often have the power to speak freely.

In the classroom context, the question of agency in the construction of one's speaking self is a complex one that entangles itself, like this very writing, in a network of power relations. The question of how one positions oneself within the institution is paradoxically structured, as Foucault (1980) has said, "so that the procedures of [my] normalization come to be ever more constantly engaged in the colonization of those of law" (p.107). The question remains: how does one escape this tangled web of relations, while the spider waits, ready to pounce?

The mechanisms of power function ironically through the dialogue of the classroom. Dialogue becomes, simultaneously, a form of liberation and an imperative. In either instance, it operates at the expense of its lack, a certain silence. Thus, in this context dialogue retains its potential to attach itself to new binary oppositions. To deconstruct this, which is constructed through the power dynamics inherent in the student/professor relationship and the classroom itself, the subjectivities of each individual (component) must be taken apart. Such a dismantling, as Derrida notes, however, carries with it new risks.

In describing the deconstruction of the idea of woman as 'speaking subject,' for example, Derrida states, "If you keep the philosophical axiomatics, implying that women are subjects, then you keep the whole framework on which the traditional university is built. [In contrast] If someone tries to deconstruct the notion of subjectivity within women's studies, saying, 'well, woman is not a subject, we no longer consider woman as a subject'—this would have two consequences, one radically revolutionary or deconstructive, and the other dangerously reactive" (1990, p.188). Yet Derrida argues that we must take this risk. As academics and researchers we often, paradoxically, find ourselves re-constructing the same structures that we are is trying to dismantle, transform, or re-fashion. It can be difficult to know whether one's speech or one's ideas are revolutionary or reactive. Foucault has said that one can never think outside of one's episteme. But the continual transformation of meaning has the potential to create, also, multiple exchanges of meaning that lead to new epistemes. This transformation is, finally, a never-ending dialogue; the conversation thus shifts from a means-to-an-end to an ending which is never finally there. Viva la difference!

For there to be no end-point, I must continue this conversation even while I argue that the idea of classroom dialogue is impossible. Even the simplest conversation carries with it the potential to turn an exchange of meaning into multiple changes of meaning. Comments like, "The Canucks were great tonight," when heard against the response, "No, they weren't, they were awful," puts into questions the possibility of us, whoever we are, determining how the Canucks played in actuality. By situating that conversation, by contextualizing it—if, for example, we know that the Canucks' coach made the second comment—another layer of meaning emerges. As author-ity of/over his team, the coach's words are interpreted and contextualized

differently by spectators and players. Of course, a coach would never actually use these particular words. He might say, instead (as the Canucks' coach has several times), "They did not play a disciplined game tonight." Such a particularity of language both reveals and re-veils how words constitute authority.

Exchanging Power: The structure of language, Foucault would argue, suggests explicit connections between the physical manifestations of power and institutionalized linguistic structures. Particular types of disciplinary environments function in specific ways: the way that I see my world remains tied to my cultural and personal contexts of experience, and to my interest (or lack thereof) in power. How can one bracket oneself off from these interests and still maintain a dialogue which does not impose these differences onto someone else?

The stakes are high in trying to negotiate a workable definition for dialogue in the classroom. While one cannot negotiate one's historical place and moment, dismantling dialogic structures has far reaching ramifications: if there is no escape from one's historical moment, and there is no objectivity in history, nor truth, then to escape from the quagmire of utter relativity, to speak at all, one must situate oneself both strategically and politically. Yet, as a professor, as well as a writer, my voice functions as an im-position, and I continually place myself in an impossible situation. A certain trace of my own institutional normalization always creeps into the process. Yet, by (de) constructing a hierarchy of differences and sliding from between the confines of my preconceptions, I try to create, as Spivak (1988) says, "A pedagogy that would constantly seek to undo the opposition between verbal and social text at the same time that it knows its own inability to know its own ideological provenance" (p.98). Keep pedaling backwards.

Maracle (1990) tells me, "Just keep asking questions" (p.16). Perhaps this idea, that I continue the process(ing) of dialogue through a question period, works to prevent the further institutionalization of (my) dialogue, both inside and outside the classroom. Dialogue can no longer institute its own kind of authority over Other speakers. Through such questioning, the separation or opposition between theory and practice must finally collapse. Still, in my role as professor, I must query whether, by my very function within the institution, I do not reinstate theory /practice in some subtle way, once again sending the two on their separate (binary) journeys. The desire "to understand" creates a potentially fascistic and totalitarian reading of language itself, for understanding suggests that language needs to be both transparent and transcendent. Yet I still need to see through this the play of signifiers in order to 'teach.'

In contrast, Donna Haraway (1991) has argued that human beings need to cultivate "the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different—and power differentiated—communities (p.187). She argues, "We need the power of modern critical theories

of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for the future" (p.187). One needs, in other words, to cultivate an awareness of the very categories of thought that structure dialogue itself as a form, a structure, of communication. These categories of thought function as translations, and are consequently never neutral. Just as silence can speak itself, as Murray (1991) observes, "Absences of translation are displaced into fictive records of communication" (p.6).

A dialogic universalism is clearly a contradiction in terms. The universal implies the possibility of communicative rapport complete with resultant and total(izing) understanding. Yet, the relativistic view, on the extreme other end of the continuum, suggests that individuals are so different that any comparison and communication is, finally, impossible. Paradoxically, the extremely relativistic view, along with its alternative and contradictory counterpart, both validate my experience—but only my experience. The universal makes an/Other's speech possible for me to grasp, understand, and appropriate: I can identify with what is said to me and thereby 'own' it. Utter (or should I say 'total'?) relativity makes the Other forever unknowable, so that it is my experience, again, which, counts the most. Constructing identity on the basis of these approaches always reinstates these kinds of binary oppositions. Being Canadian means not being American. Being Canadian, on the other hand, is whatever I, as a Canadian, have experienced: neither approach requires me to shift my own categories of experience. Dialogue is displaced as the means to an/Other end.

To illustrate how this works, I draw on another example from Spivak, who questions whether or not, within the context of our historical moment, the third-world woman can speak—whether her subjectivity can even be recognized by us in the Western world. She argues that it is us, in the West, who must find ways of speaking to, and with, the subaltern woman (1988, pp.271-313). Linda Alcoff (1991) responds to Spivak's point to suggest that the privileging of the speech of the oppressed may be made "on the grounds of the very act of speaking itself. Speaking constitutes a subject that challenges and subverts the opposition between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge, an opposition that is key in the reproduction of imperialist modes of discourse" (p.23). In these two possibilities lie the peculiar written speech/dialogue of the classroom. This dialogue, even as it realizes its own elision (through an always illusory negotiation), finally liberates both student and professor. Alcoff, moreover, points out that the decision to "move over" or retreat, from "speaking for others," can only be made from a position of privilege; she states, "Those who are not in a position of speaking at all cannot retreat from an action they do not employ" (p. 24). Silently now, I bid a hasty retreat.

In memory of Jacques Derrida.

End Note

1. King, Thomas (1993) Green Grass, Running Water. Toronto: Harper Collins. p.273.

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